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NOME.
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Presbytery of Yukon
IN ALASKA

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE U. S. A.

NATIONAL MISSIONS COMMITTEE SURVEY OF NOME, ALASKA JANUARY 31, 1946

Louis Jacobin in a printed article entitled "There's No Place Like Nome" writes as follows:

"Nome came into being as a tent town with the discovery of gold on its beaches in 1899. The startling news flashed 'round the world that gold could be found everywhere on the sands caused a stampede rarely equaled in the annals of American history. Upwards of 40,000 miners, tradesmen, and adventurers swarmed into Nome, pitched their tents and had their supplies dumped on the beaches. Soon frame buildings sprang up, streets were laid out, and out of the bedlam and confusion the town took on the semblance of an organized municipality. Beginning as a mushroom town, Nome survived the gold boom, incorporated in 1901, and gradually settled down to a permanent basis. Gold mining is still the chief industry.

The 1940 census gave Nome's population at 1559. The present estimated population is 2,800 in winter and 4,000 in summer, about evenly divided between whites and natives. City affairs are conducted by a mayor, six councilmen and the usual number of officers. It has a municipal building which houses its police department, a central pumping system, and a fire department with modern motor equipment. Public utilities - lights, water, and telephone - are privately owned. Nome is the headquarters for all government activities in Northwestern Alaska. A large fire proof federal building and post office was built in 1938....."

Today we find the population to be estimated at between three and eight hundred less than the above figures with about two-thirds of the total population being Native.

During the war, mining has been practically closed down but in normal times the United States Smelting, Refining and Mining Company operates four large gold dredges in this area, employing 400 men seven or eight months a year and a few the year around.

Nome has been a city of transients for years but now it seems that people wish to make their home here on a permanent basis. One of the attractions on the part of the laboring man is the fact that there are no unions in Nome. Men, tired of unions, come here to get away from them. Discharged veterans look this way for the same reason.

Besides the gold industry, another industry promises to become prominent, namely handcrafts. Demands during the war for native-made products fashioned from Alaskan skins and ivory has developed this industry to an estimated $500,000 annually.

There are two schools in Nome, one of which is the Territorial school which consists of a grade school and the only high school in the Northwest area. There are about 180 pupils with 8 teachers and a superintendent. Originally, it was for white students but today there are many half-breeds in attendance. The Indian service encourages this. The Bureau of Indian affairs school or Native school now has 62 pupils, with three teachers and a principal. It is estimated that at least 50 more Eskimo children should be in the school.

Maintaining a home in Nome is fraught with a few more difficulties than in other Alaskan cities. In the first place, there is no sewer system - and except for a 90 foot strip along the seashore, the city is entirely built upon a glacier which prevents the digging of cesspools. So, human excrement must be gathered regularly as is the garbage. Homes are built off the ground to prevent the soil under the house from thawing from the heat of the house. Today, log cabins built right on the ground lean hither and yon as well as buckle in the middle with both ends high. All water must be purchased at the rate of 10¢ a bucket during the winter months or $5.00 a month in summer, when it is furnished by the mining company. Nome also has a goodly supply of rats which have to be guarded against at all times.

The hotel where we stayed has running water and flush toilets but the water, in addition to being very hard, is quite salty. It is difficult to wash in it as soap suds just don't produce. Drinking water is purchased by the hotel. The other water comes from a well under the hotel but is too close to the sea for unsalted water. Bath and basin water is drained out into the sea but toilets drain into cesspools eight feet under the sand. Sand freezes only four feet down. Purchased water comes from wells 3-4 miles from town and is delivered daily by water wagons or in winter by bob-sled tanks hauled by tractors. The merchants' delivery wagons are a combination of bob-sleds and tractors in the wintertime. Another fleet of trucks or bob-sled tractors are the oil deliveries - oil being the universal fuel in Nome.

Though the temperature is not too cold in Nome (from the Fairbanks viewpoint), yet the wind can raise havoc with the snow, whipping it up into drifts all over the city from 2 ft to 10 ft overnight. Transportation is fairly well tied up when snow-bearing winds are sweeping over the area at 20 to 40 miles an hour. Roads are blocked and air fields are closed until the blow is over. And then it takes a day or two for the town to shovel itself out again.

An Army base is located about a mile and a half from Nome with a present compliment of 500 men and officers. There is not a great deal in town for the boys' free time except the usual drinking establishments in number equal to the Alaskan average of one for every 100 to 150 people. A Red Cross Canteen answers the problem to some extent and the churches interest the boys who have church backgrounds.

In the gold rush days in the early 1900's Nome is reported to have had a population of some 30,000 people. At that time several denominations established churches here. The largest church was probably the Congregational established in 1904. In 1910 the Methodists built a church. An Episcopal Church was established and perhaps others. Today there is no Episcopal church here, the building being used as a Masonic temple. As the gold rush subsided and about the time of the first world war, Nome hit bottom in population and activity. There were enough natives for the Methodists to turn their church into a Native Church. This was about 1920. At the same time the Methodists Federated with the Congregational Church providing the only Protestant church for whites in the community. Today there is still the so-called Lavinia Wallace Young Methodist Native Church and the Methodist-Congregational Federated Church.

In the case of the Federated Church, the two participating denominations take turns in being responsible for the work at three-year intervals. One church will provide a minister and $900.00 towards his salary per year for a period of three years. After three years, the other denomination will provide the minister and $900.00 towards his salary for a three-year period. In recent years, as this plan has worked out, the period between pastors has increased until almost a year elapses after one minister leaves until the new one is on the field. This works a hardship on all concerned and the work in general.

At the present time, the church has been vacant for about six months waiting for a new Methodist minister to arrive. The pulpit has been supplied intermittently by representatives of other denominations who have drifted into the community. During this second world war, Alaska has experienced another boom due to the presence of the armed forces and the great amount of construction work of airfields, army posts, roads, telephone lines, oil lines etc. Practically every denomination among the churches is eithermoving into the territory or is expanding the work they already have here.

Until the last few weeks, the pulpit of the Federated Church has been supplied by an Assembly of God minister named Rev. Capner. In the meantime, he has built a church of his own in which he expects to have his first services in a week or two. It seems that there are very few members of the Pentecostal persuasion here, so he will be drawing on the congregation he has been ministering to in the Federated church. Last Sunday there were 40 in attendance at the Federated Sunday School with four teachers. The average has been about fifty. These are whites and a few high class half-breeds. At the church service the same Sunday evening 70 attended - all whites except one Eskimo family.

Some time ago the officers of the Federated Church found in their records that they owed the Congregational church headquarters $800.00 on the original church debt. $500.00 of this amount has been paid off and the balance could be paid immediately but the officers feel that with the debt, the denomination will keep a closer interest in their share of the work. In the past, they have been as negligent as the Methodists. They took a year to get their minister on the field and instead of putting in three years, he left at the end of two years.

Actually, the Federated church could be self-supporting and is willing to do so. They keep themselves attached in order to have some group who will feel some responsibility in supplying their minister. They would like to have the Presbyterian Church come into the Federation or take the place of one of the members and supply the minister. Otherwise, it looks as if they will still be looking for a minister for months to come. In the meantime, other churches are establishing themselves. The Church of the Nazarene have a building constructed from Army huts. The so-called Alaska Evangelization Society has a missionary and his wife here holding services in a rented place but who have begun to build. There are also two Swedish Covenant Missionaries and their families in the community who will start to build a church in the spring. The headquarters of the last church are in Chicago.

Rev. Paul Carlson of the Covenant Mission has his own cub plane. He has regular services in the surrounding native villages and is well received. Another 'flying' missionary from some other church landed in a village where Carlson has made regular visits. The newcomer announced that he was a missionary and had come for services. An Eskimo from the village looked at him and slowly drawled: "You can't fool me, I know Carlson!"

Rev. Roald Amundsen is the other Swedish Covenant Missionnary, though it seems that the word 'Swedish' is being dropped from the church name. Amundsen is the son of a Presbyterian minister in Seattle. He and his wife are young, capable, with good personalities. They have been supplying the Methodist Church for the Natives. A Miss Erickson was in charge of this mission for years but left last year for health reasons. The church is a going establishment with an average of 100 in attendance at all services. The other night we attended the prayer meeting. The wind was at its height, it was snowing and drifting badly but there were forty natives at the service. The piano player was a boy from Little Diomede. He is a product of the Swedish Covenant Missionary work on the Island which was the first Christian work on the Island. About 15 years ago the Catholic church sent a priest there who has made considerable inroads. This piano player wishes to return to the Island as a lay worker.

The Covenant Missionaries desire to buy out the Methodist Church and take over, but it is not likely that the Methodists will turn over their work to another denomination, even though they are very slow in replacing their missionary who left months ago. When the Covenant Mission builds, it is to be expected that many of the Natives with whom they have been working will naturally follow them to the new church, especially if the New Methodist missionary has not arrived.

Back in the boom days, the Catholic church established St. Joseph's hospital in Nome. When a Rev. Mr. Baldwin was the Methodist missionary in the days before the first World War, he established a clinic to care for the native children in their orphanage established after a widespread flu epidemic. When the population dropped, the Catholic church closed their hsopital (1921) and transferred it to Fairbanks, establishing St. Joseph's hospital there. This left the hospital situation up to the Methodists. They acquired a building from the Army which had been a hospital, moved it to the present location and turned what was the clinic into a nurses' home. At the present time a woman's organization of the Methodist Church-at-large contributes $200.00 a month to the upkeep of the hospital. Dr. Morcom, in charge, receives with his wife, board and a home but no financial remuneration from the hospital. His income comes from his private practice, a contract with the Indian service and a contract with the U.S.S.M. & R. There are five nurses at present.

About three years ago, a prominent Nome druggist died leaving an estate valued at $70,000 to the City of Nome to be used for the advancement of the health of Nome. Efforts are being made to have the funds used for the construction of a new hospital plus an equal amount from the Methodist church and an equal amount from the government, with a $225,000 hospital contemplated.

The Protestant ministers of Nome are organized into a Ministerial Association, the outstanding co-operative action being a hook-up with the Army radio station with a direct line from the post to the home of Rev. Amundsen. Under his leadership a 15 minute Vesper Service is broadcast each evening from 6:15 to 6:30, with the various ministers participating. A half hour on Tuesdays and Sundays is also sponsored by this group.

The Swedish Covenant Mission has the only church and missionary in the village of White Mountain which is about 90 miles from Nome. At this place the Territory maintains a boarding school for natives with about 60 in attendance at the present time. The superintendent is a Presbyterian, Miss Birdie MacNeal.

St. Lawrence Island lies about 120 miles west of Nome with Gambell on the western tip of the Island about 200 miles from Nome. The Presbyterian Mission there and at Savoonga on the Island, are reached via Nome. The Presbyterian Mission at Wales, 150 miles northwest is also reached via Nome.

There is a two-story parsonage adjoining the Federated Church. The cost of living in the parsonage runs $40 per month for oil; electricity $10-$15 a month; garbage and scavanger $3.50; water $15 month in winter and $5 in summer. The salary the church has been paying their minister is $2700 annually. (In checking over these figures, Mr. Polet states the figures for utilities are about double the average. Mr. Polet also read and corrected this entire report).

This report was compiled in Nome by N. Harry Champlin, National Missions Committee Chairman after an eight-day personal survey as directed by the Presbytery.

In view of the facts presented in this report, the National Missions Committee as a whole makes the following recommendations:

1. That the existing Federated Church agreement be liquidated and either the Methodists or Congregationalists take full responsibility.

2. That preference be shown to the Methodist Church because of the Hospital and the fact that most of thw whites claim to be Methodist.

3. That in view of more delay on the part of both Methodist and Congregational Mission Councils to propagate this work we look forward to the Federated Church taking on self-support and becoming independent, thus severing relationships with both churches and thereafter seeking a ministry from whatever source is satisfactory to the congregation. That if such an event does occur, then the Presbyterian Board of National Missions be overtured to carry out this work and that we seek to adjust the comity agreement to include Nome in our Presbyterian field. Thus our presence in Nome would be most strategic and advantageous to our Arctic Mission work in general.

4. That arrangements be made for the Swedish Covenant Mission Church to be given full responsibility for the Lavinia Wallace Young Methodist Church for Natives - in view of their longstanding and well organized Arctic work and great number of constituents already in Nome; and the fact that they have been caring for the work for many months most successfully.

In our humble opinion, the above seems to be the only solution. To be effective, it must be acted upon at once for long time and intelligent planning. To allow the present conditions to continue is delinquency.

Respectfully submitted,

N. Harry Champlin, Chairman
National Missions Committee

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